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### De godin Renenwetet

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## SUMMARY \*

The first chapter begins by noting that there are several words in Egyptian to express the concept of a nurse, of one who rears a child. Only three of these words are used in a religious sense. The word used to indicate the goddess who exercises the function of a nurse, of one who brings up, is Renenet.

In the Pyramid Texts we already read the name of Renenutet. The name of the goddess is composed of two elements: *rnn* and *wt.t*. A later form is *rm.t* while the word *rnn.t* is found from the 18th Dynasty onwards. Another way of writing Renenet in the Greek period is *rr.t*. These different designations of our goddess are accompanied by the determinatives of a cobra, a woman suckling or an egg.

Private persons may bear the name Renenutet, and the epithets of kings of the New Kingdom may also include the name Renenutet.

In Demotic, the name Renenutet became *T-Rmwte*; this *t* was changed in Greek into a voiced aspirated *th* in the name *Θέρμουθις*. In these late times we also meet with the name Hermuthis: the article has disappeared and under the influence of either Coptic or a kind of hyperurbanism a prefixed *h* appears.

We see in WB II, 435 that the word *rnn* can mean „exult, praise”. In WB II, 436 the verb *rnn* appears with the meaning „to take upon one's lap, to fondle”, used only in a religious context. Closely linked with this is the verb *rnn* (WB II, 436) „to nurse, to rear”, with the determinative of a woman with a child.

The name Renenutet is to be explained from the verbs „to fondle, to nurse or rear”. The „nursing” and „fondling” of the pharaoh commences in infancy and lasts till his death. In other words, Renenutet is the „nurse”.

The second chapter treats the iconography of the goddess. Representations of Renenutet are of many kinds, both in the round and in relief, but none are earlier than the New Kingdom.

\* Vertaald door mevr. G. E. van Baaren-Pape.

The goddess is repeatedly depicted as a „serpent”, in particular a cobra. In this shape, she may still bear emblems and even show human traits. This hooded cobra, mainly found in the wet regions of Lower Egypt, was often taken as protective spirit. As such, she is the Agathodaimon who protects and fosters the fields, the living and the dead. Secondly, this snake rises up when angry (*ʿiʿr.t* or *ʿr.t*, „the one who rises up” = οὐραῖος in Greek): her gaze subdues the enemy, but she also looks into time and determines the duration of life.

Besides being depicted as a cobra, Renenutet is shown as a woman. In this woman’s shape she is also often connected with certain animals and objects.

Thirdly, Renenutet is identified with a ruling goddess, sitting enthroned. In this shape also her theriomorphic aspects become manifest.

Finally there are many statues and depictions of Renenutet lactans. In this case the goddess is either imagined altogether as a woman, or as a woman with a serpent’s head. Adoration of the mother and child already dates from the Old Kingdom, that is to say that Renenutet only forms one embodiment of divine motherhood, beside other mother-goddesses.

The description of the cult of Renenutet in the third chapter shows that Renenutet is found in places spread all over Ancient Egypt, the Fayum seeming to have been of old an important cult area of the goddess. We may suppose Renenutet to have been the protective genius of many villages, a little chapel being built for her that the goddess might see to it that everything prospered.

Various dates were devoted to the cult of Renenutet. These feast-days were distributed over all three seasons of the Egyptian year, especially the months Pharmuthi and Pakhons being festive seasons for the worship of Renenutet.

In the fourth chapter the character of the goddess is discussed at some length. The earliest data indicate that the task of Renenutet was to nurse and bring up the pharaoh. The uraeus-snake and the Renenutet-snake are linked in their protective task in the service of the king. Hence Renenutet can be the uraeus-snake.

Then again, Renenutet was seen as goddess of the riches of the earth. In the fruitfulness of the earth a certain facet of divine cosmic life became visible to the Egyptians.

The maternal qualities were gathered in Renenutet, qualities she even exercised towards the dead.

Renenutet also has to do with woven material; she is the personification of linen, in agreement with WB II, 438. In this quality she is equated with the uraeus-snake, so that the gods fear her. Considering the Maat character of the woven garment, it occasions no surprise that Renenutet is garbed in linen and that the eye of Horus is repeatedly identified with the garment of Renenet, even, indeed, with the Renenutet-snake.

Renenutet is supervisor of woven materials. In Denderah she provides the dead with mummy bandages, and in Edfu she is represented with garments in her hands.

Having regard to all these data, we may say that Renenutet provides a fitting place for the gods, the divine king and the dead to participate in the totality of cosmic order. In this, the symbolism of the garment plays a definite part.

Consequently Renenutet was regarded as the Maat-goddess, who tends (*rnn*) the course of multifarious life in harmony with the cosmic order. From the moment of birth, she gives the events of life their proper place on the cosmic plane. As „personification of the garment“, the goddess determines the duration of life in accordance with the divine order of the world.

Renenutet is also a goddess of the dead: as goddess of vegetation she provides the dead with food, and as „mistress of the robes“ she wraps the mummies in their bandages.

Chapter five deals with the relations between Renenutet and other deities. A summary description is first given of the deities concerned, and their points of resemblance with Renenutet are then examined.

It is concluded that Renenutet and Meskhenet are both goddesses who give life, which they impel forward from the moment of birth. This thesis is strengthened if Shay is also considered: the §3j man receives at birth grows up under the care of Renenutet. There cannot have been a separate word Renenet signifying „luck“, „wealth“, but in a secondary sense Shay and Renenet may take the meaning of „luck“ and „prosperity“, thus reflecting the experiences of life.

In so far as every man has „his allotted span“ or „a period when his Shay unfolds“ Shay and Renenet become part of the human personality and can even appear as such independently.

Renenutet and Nepri are both concerned with the felicitous functioning of kingship. Nepri as a child of Renenutet is hardly acceptable, at most, the *k3-mw.t.f* idea is expressed in Nepri.

Renenutet and Uto are in close harmony: the goddesses are matched in iconography, and together they carry out their activity of *rnn*.

Especially in the Fayum Renenutet and Sobk appear together, presumably owing to the fact that there Sobk is the form in which Osiris appears.

The relation of Renenutet with Isis is of a complicated nature. Points of resemblance between the two goddesses are discussed to make it understandable from the religious point of view how it was possible for the Egyptians to identify Isis with Renenutet. The conclusion must finally be drawn that it was not until Graeco-Roman times that the texts give evidence of the assimilation of Isis and Renenutet.

Starting from the Isis hymns of Medinet Mâdi, chapter six traces in how far the qualities of Renenutet aegyptiaca were preserved until the first century B.C.

In these hymns, which come from the Fayum, the goddess Hermuthis is honoured. She is equated with Isis. We find that in Graeco-Roman times the goddess (T)hermuthis still appears as a cobra and exercises a protective function.

Hermuthis-Isis is described in the hymns of Medinet Mâdi as goddess of fertility, as Panthea, as Bona Fortuna, as bearer of Maat and as the unique one. In discussing these aspects, comparisons are made with the ancient Egyptian figures of Renenutet and Isis, and the elements of the hymns are illustrated by parallel passages. Possible motives are indicated which may have occasioned certain syncretistic phenomena.

The months Pharmuthi and Pakhons, particularly associated with the festivals of Renenutet, were also in the Graeco-Roman period the months (besides Thoth) for the celebration of the Hermuthis festival. This accorded easily with the important Isis festivals held in these months.

Our final conclusion is: the hymns of Medinet Mâdi with their triad Hermuthis-Sekonopis-Ankhoe (in ancient Egypt: Renenutet-Sobk-Horus the child) have a great resemblance to the triad Isis-Osiris-Horus. In the syncretistic process we see in these hymns how the worship of Isis comes to form as it were the shell of an existing cult of some other goddess, who is equated with Isis.

In completion, a short list of epithets of Renenutet is added. Most of these epithets have to do with the vegetative nature of the goddess.